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ABSTRACT

This paper reports survey results, from a sample of 76 women past child bearing age with varying numbers of offspring, which suggest that not only sibling absence but also distinctive characteristics of mothers would be considered in studies of the personal and social characteristics of only children. (Among the maternal characteristics mentioned were birth complications, mothers' affiliativeness and attitudes toward children.) The review of related literature points out questionable interpretations and conflicting results of prior studies and indicates weaknesses in the arguments that differences between only and other children are caused by the absence of a younger sibling. Particular attention is given to the interpretation of the fact that only children score lower than expected on IQ tests. (RH)

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The One-Child Family: In Transition

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The U. S. Census reports that the number of women expecting to have just one child has increased from 6% in 1955 to 11% in 1974. Although the reasons for this shift are unclear, it seems likely that the increasing financial costs of rearing children and women's desires to pursue careers outside the home make substantial contributions to the increase in one-child families.

This increase has occurred despite the negative beliefs most Americans have about only children. Over 80% of Americans surveyed in 1972 reported that they thought being an only child is a disadvantage (Blake, 1974). When undergraduates were asked to describe the typical only child, a predominantly negative image emerged. Only children were portrayed as: "generally maladjusted, self-centered and self-willed, attention-seeking and dependent on others, temperamental and anxious, generally unhappy and unlikeable, and yet somewhat more autonomous than a child with two siblings" (Thompson, 1974).

It appears from this evidence that Americans assume that a critical factor in proper social development is the presence of siblings within the family. However, a serious study of the literature yields little support for the assumption regarding the necessity of siblings (Falbo, 1977). Note that little research has been conducted about only children and this makes really firm conclusions about them unjustified at present. Current research results relevant to only children can be classified into three types: those with conflicting results, those finding no differences between only children and others, and those with results consistent with popular stereotypes about only children. I will give examples of research fitting each of these three catagories.

The conflicting results about only children can be found in studies of birth order. Here only children are frequently lumped together with first borns. For example, in 1976, Miller and Maruyama reported that only and first borns received lower ratings on peer seating choices than other children--a finding they related to peer popularity. However, in 1963, Sells and Roff reported that only and first borns received higher liking ratings from their peers than did other borns. In both studies, the samples represented the children present in a particular school, or particular grades within a school district. As reviewers of the birth order literature have noted, these conflicting results are probably due to peculiarities of the sample from which the subjects were drawn--that is, chance variation, self-selections, or generational shifts in frequency of certain family sizes and birth orders.

Besides conflicting results, much of the research which has directly focused on only children and their social adjustment has reported finding no differences between them and others. For example, in 1932, Dyer compared the scores of only and other borns on the Bell Adjustment Inventory and found that for the majority of scales, only children were indistinguishable from others. On the few scales where only children differed, they scored higher than the others. I might add that one needn't go back as far as 1932 to find research reporting no differences between only children and others.

The third type of research findings, those involving negative findings about only children, frequently are the result of questionable interpretations of data. I will present two important examples: one about masculinity femininity and the other, about intelligence.

In a book entitled The Sibling, (1970) Sutton-Smith & Rosenberg wrote:

> "There are other data to show that the only boy is more feminine than other males, and the only girl more masculine; moreover, that the deviation in these opposite-sex directions leaves them with a greater tendency toward sex deviations consonant with these tendencies" (p. 153).

Sutton-Smith and Rosenberg (1970) cited four references in support of this statement (Gundlach & Riess, 1967; Heilbrun & Fromme, 1965; Hooker, 1931; Rosenberg & Sutton-Smith, 1964). An examination of these studies, however, indicates that they provide little or no support for the Sutton-Smith and Rosenberg statement. In three of the four studies cited, no measure of sexual deviancy was included in the research. These three studies contained various measures of conformity to American sex role norms. The first study concerned teacher ratings of the classroom behavior of elementary school students. Among other findings, Hooker (1931) reported that teachers rated only children as more likely to "show signs of being sissies or tomboys" (p. 126). In the second study (Rosenberg & Sutton-Smith, 1965), only the only boys demonstrated an unusual sex role pattern. These boys (N=12) scored high on both masculinity and femininity scales. Considering what is known about androgyny, it would appear that these people had an ideal sex-role adjustment. Finally, in the third study (Heilbrun & Fromme, 1965), the masculinity/femininity scores of only children did not differ significantly from those of children with siblings and I really don't know why it was included. Thus, the evidence cited by Sutton-Smith and Rosenberg does not really justify the conclusion that only child boys are more likely to be more feminine than other boys and only child girls are more likely to be more masculine than other girls.

The fourth reference cited by Rosenberg and Sutton-Smith does, in fact, deal with the relative frequency of birth orders in a sample of lesbians and nonlesbians. However, this study did not find that only children were more likely than others to be found among the lesbian sample. Instead, Gundlach and Riess (1967) reported that a disportionate number of only children, and first borns of a two child family, and later borns from large families were found among the lesbian sample, although they had no explanation for this finding. It was especially perplexing to them because just the reverse had been found about the frequency of only children among male homosexuals (Bieber et al., 1962). A likely explanation for the Gundlach and Riess results lies in errors associated with the sample, rather than something intrinsic to only children. The nonlesbian sample consisted of women whom the authors found working in their offices, while the lesbian women consisted of women who were involved in psychotherapy. This sampling error could be brought about by the self-select nature of the lesbian sample and the questionable selection procedure undertaken in obtaining the nonlesbian sample.

The second example of research literature with questionable interpretations of results concerns the confluence model. Note that in the realm

of intelligence, we have a legitimate, negative finding about only children. Several large scale investigations of IQ have found that IQ is inversely related to family size. Given this, one would expect only children to have the highest IQ of all. This is not the case. Only children consistently score lower than children from two child families and at a level comparable to first borns from three to five child families. Why? Zajonc and Markus (1975) explained this finding in terms of only children lacking siblings. They argued that because only children lack younger siblings to tutor, they lose their advantage in IQ. Zajonc and Markus incorporated this explanation into their model of intellectual development despite the fact that there is no evidence that tutoring someone younger results in an IQ gain for the tutor, not the tutee. But Zajonc and Markus had two justifications for promoting sibling tutoring as an explanation. First, last borns like only children, also deviated negatively from their expected position. Since only and last borns share the common fate of not having a younger sibling, Zajonc and Markus thought that this sibling lack must be the cause of the lowered IQ. Therefore, equations representing only and last borns contained a zero, while equations representing all other birth orders and family sizes contained a one. Second, because the correlation between data simulated by these equations and aggregate data was high (.97), Zajonc and Markus felt that this supported the sibling tutoring explanation.

While there is no question that only children score lower than expected on IQ tests, there is reason to question the explanation offered by Zajonc and Markus. I started looking for alternate explanations--and it didn't take me long to find one. Only children are more likely than children from 2-4 child families to come from single parent homes and there is evidence that children from single parent homes have lower IQs than children from two parent homes (Shinn, 1978), although I admit that this point may be controversial. Using equations representing the confluence model, I (Falbo, 1978a) found that the greater incidence of father absence among one child families accounts for 25% of the difference between where only children should score and where they actually do.

This brings me to comment that even though most investigators attribute any differences between only children and others to their lack of siblings, logically it is just as likely, in fact, maybe more likely that distinctive features of only child parents bring about these observed differences. Given the well-documented social expectation that married couples should have at least two children, one should be suspicious of people who have just one child. They have defied a rather persuasive social norm. A good example of such a distinctive characteristic is the previously mentioned fact that among ever-married women currently past child bearing age, those with just one child are more likely to have been widowed or divorced than women with more children. Therefore, any study of only children should examine this as a possible alternative explanation for differences found between only children and others.

Other characteristics of only child parents I examined in a survey of 76 mothers conducted in North Carolina (Falbo, 1978b). All were past child bearing age, and 28 were mothers of one child, 21 mothers of two children, 19 mothers of three children and the remaining eight were mothers of four or five children. I compared only child mothers to the other mothers to see what other distinctive characteristics only child mothers may have

which would be relevant to generating distinctive characteristics in their only children. Three characteristics were considered: (1) the subfecundity of the mother, (2) the mothers' attitudes towards only children, and (3) the mothers' affiliativeness. These characteristics are not exhaustive of parental characteristics which may distinguish one child mothers from others. They simply represented my best guess at the time about distinctive characteristics of only child parents and served merely as a starting point.

These characteristics were measured in terms of responses to questionnaire items. The questionnaires were mailed to the mothers of students at Wake Forest University. The mothers were paid $5.00 for their participation; while, the students were given course credit.

First, about maternal subfecundity, four items on the questionnaire dealt with their remembrances concerning the birth of their children. These items were designed to elicit information about the incidence of birth complications. These questions asked about whether forcepts were used, whether the mother suffered depression or severe weight changes after the birth, and whether a caesarian had been performed. Combining the responses to all four questions, the results indicated that 50% of the one child mothers reported yes to at least one of these items, compared to 23% of the mothers with two or more children. To the extent that this finding can be generalized to all only child mothers, it suggests that many women have just one child because they had physical problems with the pregnancy and/or childbirth and decided not to undergo this experience again.

The second characteristic of these mothers considered in this small survey is their attitudes towards only children. Even though most Americans disapprove of having just one child, this attitude is not universal. Only child mothers may be more likely than others to approve of having only children.

One item on the questionnaire asked the mothers how much they thought only children suffered. Mothers of one child rated the amount of only child suffering lower than mothers of two or more children.

In interpreting this finding, one is confronted with the same problem students of the causal relationship between attitudes and behavior generally have. That is, we don't know whether these positive attitudes towards only children preceded their decision to have one child or whether after having just one child, these mothers altered their attitudes about only children to justify their behavior.

The third distinctive characteristic of only child mothers examined in the survey involved affiliativeness. According to the stereotype, only children are lonely, social isolates. As mentioned previously, the evidence is equivocal regarding whether only children are more or less popular than others. However, <u>if</u>, after extensive study, we find only children to be less affiliative than others, then one may wonder whether lacking siblings is the cause or whether only child parents are less affiliative than parents of more children. Perhaps, only child parents have just one child because they prefer solitude to continuous social involvement. To examine this possibility, I asked the mothers to estimate on their questionnaire how many friends and close friends they had. Mothers of only children reported having fewer friends and close friends than mothers of two or more children. Therefore, to the extent that this finding is generalizable to only child mothers in general, it appears that only child mothers are less affiliative than others.

In conclusion, when examining only children, researchers have too often assumed that their lack of siblings is the sole cause of any difference between only children and others. The results of my small survey suggests that only child parents are different from other parents in ways which could lead only children to be different from other children. For example, the higher incidence of divorce and widowhood among mothers of only children could lead to the children's lowered IQ scores; the knowledge that this child is the only one they're capable of having or willing to have may lead some only child mothers to be more protective of their children than other mothers; or, parents who are themselves less affiliative may train children to expect and prefer a smaller number of friends. In future research, both parents and siblings should be regarded as potential causal agents of the personality and social characteristics of only children.

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